

Keizertimes

Integrity for Oregon's election system

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By KIM THATCHER

With the election season upon us it's fitting to discuss whether our state laws are strong enough to protect against voter fraud, especially with the deadline to register to vote in the November election coming up October 16. This has been a priority for me since I was a freshman on the House Elections and Rules Committee seven years ago.

I've been working hard on legislation to bring Oregon in line with federal standards for providing identification when registering to vote for the first time. Let me explain. Under the national Help America Votes Act one has to provide identification in order to register to vote in federal elections. However, in Oregon there are no ID requirements for voting in state and local elections. None.

This issue has generated considerable debate in recent years across the country where voters who still go to the polls are asked to show identification before they can cast a ballot. Thirty states now have similar laws. However, Oregon is unique with our vote-by-mail system and according to the National Association of State Legislators our state is also the only one with a dual system for voter registration identification rules.

Yes, the Oregon Constitution says "every citizen" is "entitled to vote" basically as long as they meet eligibility standards. That part of the document is called "Qualifications of electors." Shouldn't we be more careful to ensure voters meet constitutional qualifications to vote on the important issues and races facing Oregonians?

At last check there were around 9,000 people in Oregon who did not meet the identification requirements to vote in federal elections, but were permitted to cast votes on ballot measures and candidate races at the state and local level. They can even sign petitions for ballot measure initiatives. Why can't we simply copy federal standards and paste them into state law?

Another important point is that both the federal and state constitutions talk about the right of "citizens of the United States" to vote. For several years I tried to pass a bill to limit voter registration to just that — citizens. There is a box you can check on the voter registration form declaring that you are indeed a citizen, but I'm not sure the elections division even does random checks to verify citizenship. Because there is currently not the political will at the state capitol to adopt this approach I decided to attempt another common sense way to ensure we have a basic rule for identification.

I worked hard during the 2011 legislative session on compromise language that was workable for elections officials and will continue to bring diverse parties to the table. Opponents argue this proposal would discourage people from registering to vote and disenfranchise low-income or minority populations who might not have the necessary ID.

The fact is, we live in a world where by the time you turn 18 years old you can not only vote, but also join the military, drive a car, obtain a library card, buy a shotgun, open a bank account, attend college, and exercise countless other responsibilities. Many require some kind of identification. Even the federal voter ID law allows those who don't have a Social Security card or drivers' license to use a paycheck, bank statement, utility bill or "other government document." I have a hard time believing someone couldn't come up with one of those minimal forms of identification.

Not only would this new law help prevent fraud in our voting system and but it adds a level of fairness for those who are eligible to vote. Why should those who are not legally entitled to cast a ballot be allowed to weigh in on decisions that impact the rest of us who are?

Current state law doesn't spell out what kind of identification first time voters are required to provide when they register to vote in Oregon. We need to add more accountability to state and local elections and apply the same standards already used by officials across the state when deciding who can vote in federal elections.

Finally, a quote from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she was a U.S. Senator pushing election reforms: "Voting is the most precious right of every citizen, and we have a moral obligation to ensure the integrity of our voting process." I couldn't agree more and hope you'll help me add this sensible protection to Oregon's voting process.

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